

Our nation's transportation policy is at a crossroads. Over the past ten years, greater local input and innovative funding enabled by ISTEA and TEA-21 have enabled us to create a much stronger transportation system. Yes, traffic congestion continues to plague many metropolitan regions across the country, but now states and local jurisdictions have a greater range of tools available for tackling these problems. Many communities are investing in new transportation modes -- such as light rail, bus rapid transit, high speed rail and intelligent transportation technologies -- while others are rediscovering the value of more traditional modes:

increased local bus service, streetcars, and intercity buses.

These more creative approaches not only give people an alternative to traffic congestion by providing a range of transportation choices, they help to make our communities more livable.

By providing funding for transportation choices beyond building the Interstate highway system, ISTEA and TEA-21 signaled a fundamental shift in transportation investments. For the first time, decision makers began to connect transportation with land use planning, engage the public in the decision-making process, and gave a stronger voice to others who care deeply about transportation, such as private service providers, organized labor, freight interests, business and community leaders, and environmental advocates.

The impact has been significant.

In the more than 120 communities I have visited since coming to Congress in 1996, I have witnessed increasing support for using transportation to stimulate private investment, to restore economic vitality to urban areas, and to enhance neighborhood livability.

Communities large and small are promoting opportunities for transit-oriented development, working to restore and reconnect long-neglected train and bus stations, and revitalizing tired strip-malls and older neighborhoods.

Despite this progress and the increasing demand for the federal government to be a strong partner in making these local visions a reality, some members of Congress are reluctant to support this trend, even moving to eliminate funding for the popular Enhancements program last summer. Debate on the House floor, however, demonstrated a strong commitment to the Enhancements program, resulting in an overwhelming vote to maintain funding for the program

that has helped hundreds of communities restore historic buildings and create bicycle and recreational trails and pedestrian facilities.

Now, however, Congress has officially put the reauthorization of the surface transportation bill on hold. What the next bill will include -- and when it is likely to pass -- depends in large part on the strength and breadth of the transportation coalition. For those of us who care about improving intermodal connections, increasing federal funds for mass transit, and providing communities with a greater variety of transportation choices, this delay gives us time to broaden our coalition and to get our message out to the public and to Congress.

To build upon our successes and ensure that we get the very best transportation bill possible, we've convened a national conference on building better communities with transit. Dubbed "Rail~Volution," this conference has, for the past nine years, brought together transit professionals, planners, elected officials, environmentalists, developers, organized labor and community advocates to share successful strategies for promoting alternative forms of transportation. (See

www.railvolution.com

) Originally focused on rail transit, the scope of this exciting conference -- which annually attracts participants from over 300 communities and several other countries --

has expanded to include bus, streetcar, bicycling and walking. The next Rail~Volution will be in Los Angeles, California on September 19-22, 2004.

Los Angeles provides an exciting back-drop for discussing these important issues. As one of the nation's largest economies and metropolitan areas, its traffic and sprawl problems are legendary. What many people are surprised to learn, however, is that Los Angeles is also

home to some of the most dynamic successes in both the public and private sector for reversing these trends. LA's transit ridership is among the highest in the nation, some of the largest and most successful transit-oriented developments are occurring in this region, and the improved connections between LA and its surrounding metropolitan neighbors have created one of the most vibrant and highly-used intercity bus and commuter rail systems in the country.

I invite you to participate in our efforts to craft a strong reauthorized TEA-21 and to join us in Los Angeles next year to help shape the future of transportation funding and the livability of our communities.

-- Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR), a member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and Co-Chair of the House Livable Communities Task Force

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